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U.S. medal awarded to former spy

From Chicago Tribune wires

WASHINGTON—President Reagan presented the nation's highest civilian award Monday to the late Whittaker Chambers, the ex-Soviet agent whose turn against communism helped inspire Reagan's own political conversion.

In choosing Chambers to receive a Medal of Freedom, Reagan has added a dash of ideology to what is usually a ceremonial occasion and a dash of fuel to a controversy three decades old.

Although most recipients are not associated with political philosophy, this is not the first time the President has given a Medal of Freedom to a figure identified with rightist ideas.

James Burnham, a historian and the founding editor of National Review, the conservative journal, received a medal last year.

But the memory of Chambers, the former Time magazine editor who charged Alger Hiss with being a Soviet spy, still irritates unhealed wounds.

TO MANY, CHAMBERS will be forever identified, along with the House Committee on Un-American Activities and Richard M. Nixon, who as a representative played a prominent part in the Hiss case, with the period's anti-communist fervor that continues to stir angry passions on the left.

Honored alongside such figures as actor James Cagney, singer Tennessee Ernie Ford and the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Chambers, who died in 1961, was praised by Reagan as one "who stood alone against the brooding terrors of our age."

"Consummate intellectual, writer of moving, majestic prose and witness to the truth, he became the focus of a momentous controversy in American history that symbolized our century's epic struggle between freedom and totalitarianism," the citation accompanying Chambers' award said.

Reagan has credited Chambers with teaching him through his writing the "bitter truth" about communism.

CHAMBERS CONFESSED that he had been a Soviet spy courier. He first attracted public notice in 1948 when he charged that in the 1930s Hiss, while a State Department official, passed along to him material destined for the Soviet Union.

After Hiss, at hearings of the House committee, denied any such relationship, he was charged with perjury and convicted after two trials. He emerged from prison in 1954 still insisting that he was innocent, a position he and his friends have asserted ever since.

Part of the political left, exemplified by The Nation and the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, continues to believe in Hiss and writes off Chambers as a liar, certainly malevolent and possibly unhinged.

Chambers died in 1961. In 1962 Lionel Trilling, the critic, who was acquainted with Chambers and believed he was telling the truth, observed that those who rallied to the cause of Hiss regarded Chambers "with loathing—the word is not too strong—as one who had resolved, for some perverse reason, to destroy a former friend."

VICTOR NAVASKY, EDITOR of The Nation, which published an attack on Chambers by a longtime Hiss supporter, Fred J. Cook, after Reagan's announcement, calls the award of the Medal of Freedom "unfortunate."

Observing that Chambers' life "seems at odds with the things that Reagan stands for," Navasky suggested in an interview that the President "is reaching for some kind of ideological symbolism."

Navasky said: "A nation's heroes are supposed to embody values that will educate the next generation. Whatever one's view of the Hiss case, it is a matter of fact that Chambers lied on any number of occasions and had a paranoid view of the world. He couldn't distinguish fact from fantasy."

On the other ideological hand columnist George Will wrote after the announcement of the award that Chambers, "touched in the end by the blinding grace of painful truthfulness, led a life worth honoring."

WILLIAM A. RUSHER, publisher of The National Review, to which Chambers contributed in the 1950s and which he served for a time as an editor, called the President's recognition "highly appropriate."

He said in an interview, "Whittaker Chambers in a very serious way sacrificed himself for this country and the values he believed in."

Rusher sees the award not as an effort to stir up the emotions aroused by the Hiss-Chambers case but as "a rather personal gesture" by the President.